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Speaking with One Voice: The Vocation of a Catholic University

Rev. Paul A. Holmes

In 2002, Seton Hall University learned of a marvelous opportunity. Indiana's Lilly Foundation had already offered \$2-million grants to many of the nation's faith-based colleges and universities to conduct a "theological exploration of vocation" at their institutions. We decided to draft a proposal for the third round of this national initiative and, after a great deal of work, we submitted a proposal entitled, "IMPACTS: Inspiring, Motivating and Promoting a Call to Service" which outlined how Seton Hall would attend to the kind of exploration Lilly was sponsoring by establishing a Center for Vocation and Servant Leadership.

In our proposal to Lilly, we wrote: "As a Catholic university, we recognize that not only persons but institutions also have a vocation." As Seton Hall endeavored to articulate what its vocation might be, we told Lilly that our institutional focus on the formation of servant leaders "provided significant impetus for our university to look beyond its walls to help heal the conditions of poverty and injustice that fester just outside our gates."

We tried to illustrate this institutional vocation with a description of just where Seton Hall is located:

A drive out of our main gate reveals a microcosm of the challenges America currently faces. A turn in one direction, and one finds a comfortable middle-American sort of downtown with shops, restaurants and tidy homes. A turn in the other direction, and one encounters rundown buildings, few viable businesses, men in their twenties standing on street corners with fewer employment options than were offered during the Great Depression. And in the background of both vistas is a train that whisks commuters to Manhattan traveling just fast enough for its passengers not to notice what they are passing through. We can do better than this — and we will do better — with faith-filled men and women who in their education at our University hear a call of vocation as a call to serve others.

Not only was Seton Hall forming servant leaders for a global society, as our mission statement promises, we were letting the proposal evaluators at Lilly Endowment know that the University was trying to respond to its own institutional vocation to be a servant leader, too. What are universities "called" to do in the world, we were asking. Those of us who drafted the proposal were convinced that "vocation" is a much broader concept, theologically, than we might have originally thought.¹

How fortunate Seton Hall was to receive the \$2 million it sought to establish its Center for Vocation and Servant Leadership. Some years later, we also received another \$500,000 — an additional grant that funded an extension of the great work we were doing under the aegis of Lilly's extremely successful Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation.

One of the Center's recent initiatives — not envisioned in our original proposal — has been its University Mission Seminar. Faculty and administrators are invited to attend an eight-week program that hopes to explore just what it means to be a Catholic university. And one of the presentations offered during the seminar was originally entitled, "The Essence of a Catholic University." However, we

believed that the title focused too much on the ethereal, the immaterial. It was eventually renamed, “What Makes a University Catholic?” One might not think there is much of a difference here. But it seemed to us that this question gets to not just the “essence” — What *is* a Catholic university? — but to the more important issue: What does a Catholic university actually *do*?²

The seminar runs every semester and, according to the participants, it is having a profound effect on how Seton Hall’s faculty and administrators think about the University’s mission. The session on “What Makes a University Catholic?” is a frank discussion about what activities, what tasks, constitute a Catholic university’s “actuating,” or “operationalizing” its identity.

In leading this session each semester, I end the presentation with an examination of a document I helped write in 2008. “Speaking with One Voice: Untested Claims” is the product of my collaboration with Dr. Richard Yanikoski when he was president of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU). We had been asked to consider what the future of Catholic higher education in the United States might look like and the first consideration of that fruitful collaboration was a sobering one. Given the vast diversity that exists among the nation’s 230 Catholic colleges and universities, how could we contemplate speaking “with one voice”? Our institutions are large and small, urban and rural, old and young, and the descriptions of our Catholic identity are varied along historical, geographical and ideological lines. *That* we are Catholic, especially after the publication of John Paul II’s *Ex corde Ecclesiae* in 1990, is still subject to a good deal of fruitful conversation on our campuses; *how* we are Catholic gets short shrift, we thought, and a consensus might be difficult to forge.

Nevertheless, Dr. Yanikoski proposed a number of questions that, we felt, needed to be answered. And we went one step further: rather than ask the questions, we endeavored to make specific claims about what *all* institutions purportedly do in order to “institutionalize” our Catholic mission.

It should be noted that the only “American” declaration about, and by, the institutions of Catholic higher education in the United States is the still-controversial statement adopted in 1967 and published three years later as the “Land O’Lakes Statement on the Nature of a Catholic University.”³ Beyond the controversies over what the statement did, and did not, say, there is a recognition in the document of the service our institutions are meant to provide. In its paragraphs on “the Catholic university and public service,” the Catholic university as “the critical reflective intelligence of the Church,” and “the Catholic university and research,” the Land O’Lakes statement provided our institutions with a brief acknowledgment of our tripartite vocation: we are called to offer service to society, service to the Church and service to the academy itself.

Dr. Yanikoski and I asked ourselves if it was possible for all the nation’s Catholic institutions of higher learning to speak with one voice about this service: to “get past” what makes us different from one another and subscribe to a description of what we are *all* trying to accomplish and, in making such a declaration, let it be known how we set ourselves apart on the landscape of American higher education. We imagined that making even “untested” claims about what all Catholic colleges and universities actually do might invigorate a national conversation about what our “vocation” as Catholic institutions might be and, as well, what the future of Catholic higher education might look like.

In setting out — not just who we are, but — what we do, a declaration would need to focus on the service Catholic institutions of higher education provide: to society, Church and academy. During Seton Hall’s University Mission Seminar, the participants are engaged in a conversation about whether, and in what ways, Seton Hall actually attends to its vocation — the service we are called to offer to its three “publics.”

Catholic Higher Education in Service to Society

In considering a Catholic institution's contribution to society at large, seven of our claims focus on what it might mean to be a "prophetic voice," how we demonstrate a "preferential option for the poor," what "good corporate citizenship" might look like, and how our programs and research attend to the "common good."

1. Catholic colleges and universities serve as a "prophetic voice" within a larger society typically described in terms of secularism, individualism, and consumerism.
2. Professional schools at Catholic colleges and universities distinctively advance the moral, ethical, and normative practices of graduates and their respective professions.
3. Our institutions demonstrate a "preferential option for the poor" in our admission practices, hiring, research priorities, teaching, and civic relations.
4. Various curricula, service learning programs and student affairs programming at Catholic colleges and universities demonstrate a particular facility in teaching students a higher-than-ordinary commitment to civic responsibility, human interdependence, and the common good.
5. Our centers, institutes and sponsored projects address societal needs in an exemplary and distinctive fashion, improving public policy, strengthening non-profit organizations and enhancing effective and ethical practices in government and business.
6. Catholic colleges and universities are models of good corporate citizenship.
7. Catholic institutions of higher education collaborate at regional, national and international levels to improve societal organizations and the quality of public life.

Catholic Higher Education in Service to the Church

How do Catholic colleges and universities serve the Church which, in many different ways, sponsors them? Five of our claims focus on the ways our graduates eventually devote themselves to ecclesial service, how we assist the other institutions of the Church like Catholic schools, hospitals and social service agencies, and how we serve the Church's "intellectual apostolate."

8. Graduates of Catholic colleges and universities typically add value in comparison to what other adults bring to the Church in terms of vocations, leadership, volunteerism, generosity, sacramental participation and lay ministry.
9. Our degree, certificate and *pro bono* service programs are specifically designed to assist other Catholic organizations, such as schools, hospitals, diocesan offices and Catholic Charities.
10. Research at Catholic colleges and universities advances the "intellectual apostolate" of the Church.
11. Catholic colleges and universities support the work of evangelization and catechesis beyond their own internal academic community.
12. Faculty at Catholic colleges and universities have assisted the Church in advancing ecumenical and interfaith dialogue, as well as in addressing the growing diversity and salient divisions within both the American and global Catholic faith community.

Catholic Higher Education in Service to the Academy

Our last eight untested claims intend to encourage conversation about how our institutions serve the academy. How do we model best practices regarding the exercise of academic freedom, employment practices and campus protocols? How do we provide “corporate witness” to the Church’s social justice teachings in our programs and research? And in what ways do we contribute to the “culture” of the academy?

13. Catholic colleges and universities assist one another (e.g., cross-registration of students, joint research, student and faculty exchanges, shared overseas programs, the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, the Association for Student Affairs at Catholic Colleges and Universities, religious order initiatives like the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities and, on a global level, the International Federation of Catholic Universities).
14. Employment practices, statements of faculty rights and responsibilities, ethical norms and campus protocols at Catholic colleges and universities serve as exemplary models for wider use.
15. Catholic colleges and universities implement academic freedom and tenure provisions in a manner which gives special attention to the “common good” criterion stated in the AAUP’s *1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*: “Institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and not to further the interest of either the individual teacher or the institution as a whole.”
16. There are distinctive curricular elements at Catholic colleges and universities that offer promise to other higher educational institutions.
17. Student Affairs practices at Catholic colleges and universities are both exemplary and potentially applicable to other institutions.
18. Catholic institutions of higher learning cooperate in a special way with one another in order to build up the Catholic academic community.
19. Catholic institutions of higher education collaborate with other universities and agencies in order to promote and give corporate witness to the Church’s social teaching.
20. There are many ways in which Catholic colleges help to change the dominant academic culture from one of suspicion, criticism, and competition to one of appreciation, openness, humility, seriousness, cooperation, and hope.

The Future

After offering our University Mission Seminar many times now, we at Seton Hall recognize that many of these claims require significant testing.

A week before the session on “What Makes a University Catholic,” the seminar participants are given a list of these twenty claims and are asked to consider them: Is each of these a strength at Seton Hall, one of its weaknesses, or do the participants feel they do not have enough information and experience to make such an evaluation? The conversation encouraged by this exercise has made all of us aware of how far we have come in actuating our Catholic identity and mission. It has also given us insights into where there may be need for sharper focus and deepened commitment.

Making these twenty claims is quite different from verifying them — not just at our venerable institution, but at all of the 230 colleges and universities that call themselves Catholic. It is our hope that, one day, the nation’s Catholic institutions of higher education will, indeed, be able to make a public declaration of how we respond to our institutional vocation.

Since 2002, our Lilly-funded Center for Vocation and Servant Leadership has provided the University with many initiatives that support both the individual and personal vocations of our students, our faculty and our staff – and we will always be grateful for the Endowment’s generosity. With the University Mission Seminar, especially, Seton Hall now has an ongoing forum for discussing our collective and institutional calling — our vocation to heal the seemingly intractable societal conditions festering at our gates, but even more: our vocation to be a servant leader not just in society, but in the Church and the academy as well.

1. I owe a debt of gratitude to Seton Hall University’s Monsignor Richard Liddy and the late Dr. William Toth who helped draft the proposal we sent to Lilly Endowment.

2. This question has been asked by many theologians and philosophers, and others, over the last several years. A good example would be Gregory J. Coulter’s “What Makes a University Catholic?” delivered at a 1994 seminar, “The Idea of Catholic University,” at the University of St. Thomas. To access the essay, go to: <http://www.shc.edu/theolibrary/edu.htm>.

3. See Neil G. McCluskey, S.J., *The Catholic University*, Neil G. McCluskey, (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, IN, 1970). While the United States Bishops authored an American application of the norms outlined in *Ex corde* in 2000, their document is recognized as a charter, of sorts, for how Catholic colleges and universities are to live out their mission and identity, it is written “to” and “for” such institutions, but not “by” them.